all prisoners. The gendarmes objected, pointing out that the politicals might exert a demoralizing influence on the local population, but Kniazev refused to rescind his order.

About that time my sister Nadya came to Alexandrovsk to visit me—twelve days in a train for a few hours of reunion with the prodigal son of the family. The friends my sister found in Irkutsk advised her to ask Kniazev for my transfer to a work gang. In the palace of the Governor General she was received by Batarevich, who proved to be familiar with my articles in the *Vestnik Evropy* and other St. Petersburg magazines. He introduced Nadya to the Governor General. Kniazev was not sure whether I was eligible for the work gang, but Batarevich dispelled his doubts. Then Nadya mentioned a law that authorized prisoners to build their own huts on prison grounds, and Batarevich confirmed that this law had never been repealed. The Governor General remarked he liked this idea and thanked Nadya for having brought the law to his attention.

In December, 1910, the first five political prisoners were transferred to the work gang: two former members of the Second Duma; Zhdanov, a long-term S-R, and I. All five of us were listed officially as aid pharmacists and were billeted in the back room of the prison pharmacy. The pharmacist did not object to us, but someone in the administration alleged that the pharmacy, with its traditional (strictly unofficial) operations in alcohol, was no place to billet politicals. The superintendent called Zhdanov and told him we had better look for other quarters and jobs.

To justify our status in the work gang, each of us had to find a suitable occupation. One of the Duma members, a physician by profession, decided to practice in the village; another, a former schoolteacher, offered to give private lessons to the children of the guards. Our S-R companion was assigned to work in the prison's art shop. Zhdanov appointed himself cook for our small community. I was ready to work as a carpenter with other prisoners, but the chief guard rejected my services. The superintendent asked me whether I could do something more in line with my professional skills, and I said, "I am a writer. I shall write." He did not object. Informally, I spent much time on the self-imposed duty of postmaster general for the Collective, supplying it with newspaper clippings and maintaining an exchange of uncensored letters between the prisoners and their relatives and friends.

We had been sheltered temporarily in a tiny cottage on a hill overlooking the prison grounds, just on the border of virgin taiga. The valley was blanketed with glittering snow. The roofs of the prison and other buildings were pure silver, but the wind had kept the trees free of snow, and the naked birches and larches made an exquisite